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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role that action research can serve in preparing future school administrators to involve families in their children's education. For purposes of the paper, action research is defined as structured field-based investigations conducted in field environments that engage teachers preparing to become school administrators in authentic learning experiences. The action research project discussed in this paper was assigned to 24 students enrolled in the principalship course at Mississippi State University in the 1996-97 school year. They worked in research teams of four or five students. Each team was required to select an elementary school and study the school's parent involvement in relation to: (1) parent-teacher organization; (2) back-to-school night; (3) parent-teacher conferences; (4) volunteers; and (5) school newsletter. Teams wrote papers on their findings in each of these areas, and papers were shared in class. The high level of student interaction and discussion that took place among the members of the five teams as they looked for consensus and closure on their findings indicated that significant affective learning occurred. When students were asked to rate their participation in the action research experience, 18 of the 24 called it "excellent," 5 said "very good," and 1 called it satisfactory. Action research can serve an important function in preparing future school administrators to involve families in their children's education. (Contains nine references.) (SLD)

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PREPARING FUTURE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS TO REACH OUT TO FAMILIES THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

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This paper focuses on the role that action research can serve in preparing future school administrators to involve families in their children's education. For the purpose of this paper, action research is defined to mean *structured field-based investigations conducted in school environments that engage teachers preparing to become school administrators in authentic learning experiences.*

From the fall of 1990 to the present, attention has been given in the administration preparation program at Mississippi State University to helping future principals and assistant principals develop the knowledge base and skills necessary to build successful school-home partnerships when they become practicing administrators. Our rationale for investing time and effort in this topic is based on the significant body of research documenting the importance of parent involvement. Over two decades of research indicates that when parents are involved in children's education, students achieve more and behave better, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic-racial background, or the family's educational level. The more extensive the parent involvement, the higher the student achievement and the better the behavior (Henderson, 1981; Henderson, 1987; Henderson & Berla, 1995).

The importance of parent involvement is recognized by policy makers, standard setting organizations, and accreditation agencies. One of the eight National Education Goals states:

> Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children.

In support of the national parent involvement goal, the National PTA (1997) has developed six national standards for parent/family involvement programs that address school-home communication; promoting and supporting parenting

skills; helping parents play an integral role in assisting student learning; parents volunteering their support and assistance at school; involving parents in school decision making and advocacy; and using community resources to strengthen schools, families, and student learning. In addition, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium of the Council of Chief State School Officers (1996), whose purpose is to develop model standard and assessments for licensing educational leaders, has called added attention to the importance of parent involvement by stating in one of their six standards that *a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families.*

Family/Parent Involvement Continuum

Preparing future school leaders to reach out to families is seen as a continuum which moves from understanding the importance of the principal in taking the lead to encourage school staffs to reach out to families to developing specific skills to put parent involvement into practice. Modules designed to assist future administrators in developing the necessary knowledge and skills are an integral part of both the principalship and instructional leadership courses. The curricula content of the modules focuses on strategies and specific activities for communicating with parents, helping parents to assist their children in learning at home, encouraging parent participation at school, specific ways to promote reading in the home, and assessing and planning parent involvement programs in schools and classrooms. Materials used to teach the modules included books, monographs, articles, and teacher-made handouts (Blendinger & Jones, 1992; Blendinger, Jones, & Verhoek-Miller, 1993; Blendinger & Jones, 1995-96; Jones, 1991).

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In teaching the modules, the terms *family involvement* and *parent involvement* are interchangeably used. The term *family*, however, refers to all adult members living in the home where the child resides, while the term *parents* refers to the child's primary caregivers. Caregivers can be biological parents, adoptive and foster foster parents, or other family members, such as grandparents, that care for the child.

As the prospective administrator travels the continuum , s/he moves from building awareness and understanding to participating in authentic parent involvement learning experiences through field-based action research. An example of an action research project carried out by students enrolled in the principalship course during the 1996-97 school year is presented in the following section.

Authenticating Learning Through Action Research

The action research project discussed in this paper was assigned to 24 students enrolled in the principalship course during the 1996-97 academic year and required them to work in research teams comprised of 4-5 students. Each team was required to select an elementary school and secure permission to investigate the school's parent involvement program in relation to five areas: (1) parent-teacher organization, (2) back-to-school night, (3) parent-teacher conferences, (4) volunteers, (5) school newsletter.

The research team's first assignment was to determine the principal's opinion of how involved parents are in their children's education in the school by asking her/him to rate the level of parent involvement on a nine-point scale with "1" representing very low and "9" representing very high. After the rating had been made, the team probed how s/he knew this? Was there evidence supporting the rating?

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After determining the general rating, the team then investigated five essential elements comprising the foundation for developing an effective school-home partnership. The elements were as follows:

1. Parent-Teacher Association or Organization (PTA/PTO). Does the school have a PTA/PTO? Is it healthy and robust? How many parent members does it have? What is the proportion of parent members to potential members? How many teacher/staff members belong? What is the proportion of teacher/staff members to potential members? How many general meetings are held per school year? How many people attend these meetings? What events are scheduled? How many people attend these events? What evidence supports the principal's response? What do the findings indicate?

2. Back-To-School Night. Does the school hold a back-to-school night? Is it successful? How many parents participate? What is the proportion of actual participants to potential participants? What evidence supports the principal's response? What do the findings indicate?

3. Parent-Teacher Conferences. Does the school regularly schedule parent-teacher conferences? When? Are they successful? How does the principal know this? How many parents participate? What is the proportion of actual participants to potential participants? Does the principal provide staff development workshops on the topic of conferencing with parents? What evidence supports the principal's response? What do the findings indicate?

4. Parent Volunteers. Are parents recruited to serve as aides in classrooms and library? Do parents work on school projects? How many parents are involved as volunteers? What evidence supports the principal's response? What do the findings indicate?

5. School Newsletter. Does the school publish a newsletter to keep parents informed? When? How is it sent home? Who does it? Is it a successful venture? How does the principal know this? What evidence supports the principal's response? What do the findings indicate?

The research team was also expected to collect artifacts (e.g., announcements, reports, memoranda, agenda and minutes, copies of newsletters, membership rosters, miscellaneous documents, etc.) supporting the findings.

After concluding their field-based investigation, the teams were required to write a 7-10 page research papers based on their findings that included demographic data about the school. All artifacts collected were also

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to be turned in with the paper. Finished reports were evaluated on the quality of content, presentation, and writing (grammar, punctuation, and spelling).

A synopsis of the findings at each of the five schools follow. It should be noted that the level of accreditation shown for the school district of which the school was a part pertains to the Mississippi Department of Education's assessment system which assigns accreditation ratings based on academic performance with "1" signifying the lowest rating and "5" signifying the highest rating.

Elementary school No. 1
Grades: K-6
Student enrollment for 1996-97: 422
Percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch: 60%
School district's accreditation level: 3.0
Principal's rating of parent involvement at her/his school: 6

Parent-Teacher Association: School was affiliated with the National PTA. Strong membership--196 parents were members for the 1996-97 school year; 100 % of the school staff were members. PTA held one meeting per month with attendance averaging 75 persons. PTA sponsored open houses, special speaker nights, a spring music concert, and a Halloween fund-raising carnival. Documentary evidence supported the principal's statement that the school had an active PTA with many members.

Back-To-School Night: A back-to-school night was scheduled for the first night of school. Its purpose was to inform parents about the upcoming school year and help foster teacher-parent-student relationships. Approximately 60% of the parents attended. Attendance was documented by a sign-in sheet filed in the school office.

Parent-Teacher Conferences: Schoolwide regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences for information sharing purposes were not held during the 1996-97 school year. Only problem-solving parent-teacher conferences were held to address specific problems.

Volunteers: Parents and interested community citizens were recruited to assist with special projects, such as the Halloween carnival, but not to assist in classrooms or the library. During the 1996-97 school year, approximately 20 parents volunteered to help with special projects. No documentary evidence was available.

School Newsletter: During the 1996-97 school year, a school newsletter was published to inform parents about events and activities. The principal was directly in charge of the newsletter

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which was sent home twice a month. According to the principal, the newsletter successfully keeps parents informed. Researchers obtained copies of the newsletter.

Elementary school No. 2
Grades: K-6
Student enrollment for 1996-97: 1,150
Percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch: 53%
School district's accreditation level: 4.2
Principal's rating of parent involvement at her/his school: 5

Parent-Teacher Organization: School was not affiliated with the National PTA. Low membership--70 parents were members for the 1996-97 school year. Only eight the teachers and staff members belonged. It should be noted, however, that the 70 parent members were very active. PTO held eight meetings during the school year and two in the summer. PTO minutes showed that attendance averaged seven persons per meeting. PTO sponsored fund raisers, teacher appreciation lunches, an talent shows. The PTO raised $25,000 during the school year investigated. Researchers examined documentary evidence supporting the fact that the school had an active PTO with a low membership.

Back-To-School Night: A back-to-school night was scheduled the night before school started. Its purpose was to inform parents who will be their children's teachers for the coming school year. The principal estimated that 95% of the parents attended. Attendance was not documented.

Parent-Teacher Conferences: The school did not schedule parent-teacher conferences for information sharing purposes during the 1996-97 school year. Only problem-solving parent-teacher conferences were held as needed to address specific problems.

Volunteers: Parents and interested community citizens volunteered for special projects such as book fairs, chaperoning field trips, and assisting in classrooms or the library. The principal did not know how many people served as volunteers since records are not kept. No documentary evidence was available.

School Newsletter: During the 1996-97 school year, a monthly school newsletter was published by the PTO to inform parents about events and activities. The newsletter was computer generated and the principal helped with the project. According to the PTO officers, the newsletter successfully kept parents informed. Researchers obtained copies of the newsletter.

Elementary school No. 3
Grades: K-6
Student enrollment for 1996-97: 385
Percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch: 42%
School district's accreditation level: 2.9
Principal's rating of parent involvement at her/his school: 4

Parent-Teacher Association: School was affiliated with the National PTA. Low membership--35 parents were members for the 1996-97 school year. Few teachers or staff were members. One PTA meeting per month

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was held in conjunction with student events such as plays and concerts. Attendance ranged from 25-100 persons depending on the the event and time of year. No documentary evidence was available.

Back-To-School Night: The school did not schedule a back-to-school night, but did hold an open house immediately after the first grading period, approximately nine weeks after school begun. Its purpose was to facilitate parent-teacher communication. No documentary evidence was available.

Parent-Teacher Conferences: Schoolwide regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences for information sharing purposes were not held during the 1996-97 school year. Only problem-solving parent-teacher conferences were held as necessary to address specific problems.

Volunteers: Principal estimated that many parents and interested community citizens volunteered their time to assist with special projects, but he didn't know how many volunteered. No documentary evidence was available.

School Newsletter: The school did not publish a newsletter to inform parents about events and activities during the 1996-97 school year.

Elementary school No. 4
Grades: K-6
Student enrollment for 1996-97: 480
Percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch: 21%
School district's accreditation level: 3.0
Principal's rating of parent involvement at her/his school: 4

Parent-Teacher Organization: School was not affiliated with the National PTA. Automatic membership--no fees were charged and parents and school staff members were automatically considered members for the 1996-97 school year. PTO meetings were held throughout the school year, usually in conjunction with a class play or program, such as the annual Christmas program. Estimated attendance ranged from 200 persons to 7. No records were kept and no documentary evidence was available.

Back-To-School Night: A back-to-school day was scheduled for the afternoon before school begun in the fall. Its purpose was to inform parents about the upcoming school year and help foster teacher-parent-student relationships. The principal thought attendance was good but didn't actually know how many parents attended. No documentary evidence was available.

Parent-Teacher Conferences: Schoolwide parent-teacher conferences were not regularly scheduled for information sharing purposes were held during the 1996-97 school year. Only problem-solving parent-teacher conferences were held as necessary to address specific problems.

Volunteers: During the 1996-97 school year, no parents or interested community citizens volunteered to help at the school.

School Newsletter: The school did not publish a newsletter during the 1996-97 school year.

Elementary school No. 5
Grades: K-4
Student enrollment for 1996-97: 1,040
Percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch: 48%
School district's accreditation level: 3.3
Principal's rating of parent involvement at her/his school: 3

Parent-Teacher Organization: School was not affiliated with the National PTA. Principal claimed the PTO had many parent and school staff members but did know how many. PTA held one meeting per month and the principal considered attendance to be good but didn't actually know how many people attended. Sign-in sheets were given to the PTO officers. Children's classes usually presented programs at the meetings. No documentary evidence was available.

Back-To-School Night: A back-to-school night was scheduled on the 10th of September. Principal claimed attendance was very good but didn't know how many parents actually attended. Sign-in sheets were kept but given to the PTO officers. Little documentary evidence was available.

Parent-Teacher Conferences: Schoolwide regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences for information sharing purposes were held twice during the 1996-97 school year, once in the fall and once in the spring. Principal estimated that 80% of the parents attended the conferences but couldn't produce any records. Principal said problem-solving parent-teacher conferences were held throughout the year as needed to address specific problems. No documentary evidence was available.

Volunteers: Parents and interested community citizens were encouraged to assist with special projects, in classrooms, and in the library. According to the principal, volunteers were heavily recruited to help with fund raising projects. The principal couldn't produce any records substantiating the number of volunteers or what they actually did. No documentary evidence was available.

School Newsletter: The school did not publish a newsletter during the 1996-97 school year.

Once the papers were completed, the teams shared their findings in class, discussed knowledge gained from conducting the research, and searched for generalizations derived from considering the five schools as a case. Class findings were as follows:

1. All the schools had PTA/PTO organizations. With the exception of one school, membership was poor. Attendance at meetings ranged widely.

2. All the schools held back-to-school nights (or the equivalent). Attendance was considered good.

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3. Most of the schools did not hold regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences for information sharing purposes. Problem-solving conferences were held as needed to address specific problems.

4. Parents served as volunteers at most of the schools.

5. The majority of the schools did not publish a newsletter.

6. Principals appeared to give little importance to parent involvement since they had only minimal knowledge of what was taking place or kept little documentary evidence. Principals' opinions of how involved parents are in their children's education at their schools averaged 4.4 on a nine-point scale with "1" representing very low and "9" very high.

7. Any generalizations made must be limited to the five elementary schools constituting the case.

The high level of student interaction and discussion which took place among the members of the five teams as they sought come to consensus and bring closure on their findings indicated that significant affective learning occurred. When the 24 students enrolled in the principalship course were asked to rate their participation in their action research project experience in terms of authentic learning, 18 (75%) stated *excellent*, 5 (20%) said *very good*, and 1 (5%) responded *satisfactory*. No one gave this learning experience an *unsatisfactory* rating.

In conclusion, our experiences for the past seven years in using structured field-based investigations to foster authentic learning experiences have been very positive. We Believe that action research serves an important role in preparing future school administrators to involve families in their children's education.

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